

## **The North Dakota Cultural Heritage Initiative (NDCHI)**

### Introduction

#### List of Partner Organizations:

Museums in North Dakota (MiND)  
Dickinson State University  
National Historic Sites (NHS)  
    Knife River Indian Villages  
    Fort Union Trading Post  
North Dakota Art Gallery Association (NDAGA)  
Plains Art Museum  
State Historical Society of North Dakota (SHSND)  
    State Archivist  
    Historic Sites Manager  
    Curator of Collections Management  
North Dakota Library Association (NDLA)  
West Fargo Public Library

#### I. Need and Rationale

Like most states, North Dakota's cultural heritage faces numerous challenges including geographic isolation, lack of overall focus and funding for collections-related activities, a shortage of both trained professionals and training opportunities, an overall lack of technology (many organizations have no computers or internet access), and extreme climatic conditions examples of which include the 1997 flood and fire in Grand Forks and the Northwood tornado in the fall of 2007. These major disasters mobilized volunteers from across the state to assist in salvage of artifacts and other historic materials. There is no formal statewide emergency preparedness plan, nor do many individual institutions have a plan that can be rolled out when an emergency arises. Compounding the lack of a statewide plan is the lack of an established collegial network to know who to contact to offer assistance or who has resources at hand to assist in an emergency.

Despite the fact that only 18 institutions within the state responded to the Heritage Health Index survey, it accurately reflects mutual challenges faced by all librarians, archives, and museums across the state including poor environmental conditions for collections, a lack of emergency planning, no staff devoted to collections care (and in many cases no staff at all beyond volunteers), and an overall lack of public awareness for and about collections care. Compounding these circumstances is the lack of a conservator in the state. Instead many

cultural institutions turn to the Midwest Art Conservation Center in Minneapolis for post disaster recovery assistance, treatment, consultations, assessments, and training opportunities.

A group representing the related organizational types listed above along with an advisory representative from the Midwest Art Conservation Center met to prioritize collections issues in the state. As a result of that initial discussion, the North Dakota Cultural Heritage Initiative (NDCHI) formed and proposed to organize a series of eight assessment meetings and informational gatherings based on the successful ND State Tourism Conference model to ascertain the current state of collections care throughout the state. Tying our efforts to those of the ND Department of Tourism can only have positive results as many state tourist destinations hold important collections benefitting state tourism trade – collections can affect the state's bottom line. These meetings will take place in a concentrated period occurring in October, 2009 in Williston, Dickinson, Minot, Bismarck, Devils Lake, Jamestown, Grand Forks and Fargo, ND.

The NDCHI group initially targeted emergency preparedness and response as the key need in the state from the Heritage Health Index report. In addition to emergency preparedness and response, The NDCHI is also seeking to determine the types of collections existing within the state and the condition they are in, as well as focus on the needs identified by the guardians of the state's large and varied collections and plan on utilizing the experience and expertise of Clearwater Communications group to assist with coordination and planning of the meetings as well as the final compilation and dissemination of the collected data. The group discussed using traditional survey methodology (paper, web-based) and decided that a survey is not an effective way to communicate and receive feedback about the status of collections in North Dakota. Many local historical societies and museums are understaffed or unstaffed and are open limited hours, often closed from September to May. Widespread participation can be achieved if we offer travel reimbursement to regional meetings that don't require driving hundreds of miles, and if we offer programming that is helpful and can be easily implemented. This series of assessment meetings will initiate discussion, help determine the current state of collections care, and initiate partnerships for sharing expertise, resources, and aid throughout the state of North Dakota.

To effectively address the HHI's primary recommendations the NDCHI and the Clearwater Communication group will methodically poll each participating organization during the above described meetings on how each deals with the four primary HHI recommendations: safe conditions for collections, emergency planning, assigning responsibility for collections care, and raising public awareness and marshaling public and private support for focused collections care. Spending the bulk of the meeting getting information from the attendees, we will ask: what is the current state of their collections, what are their collection priorities, types of collections, physical conditions, and their most immediate concerns. The NDCHI and Clearwater Communications will compile subsequent findings/results into a database and share the findings statewide. The concerns brought to light at the regional assessment meetings will determine what hands-on training, panel discussions, and workshops will be of most value to cultural organizations in the state in a future implementation phase. A major outcome of these

meetings will be to get people with common responsibilities and common challenges together to realize what resources we can be for each other.

The eight regional planning meetings will serve as a launch pad for continuing efforts to provide a network of museum, archives, and library professionals and volunteers, to establish a comprehensive statewide collections assessment database, and the beginnings of a statewide emergency preparedness plan. Through marketing and public relations efforts, the regional meetings will also raise the profile of collections care needs and actively engage state government officials, and private individuals alike in efforts to preserve North Dakota's rich cultural heritage. We will provide resource materials to meeting participants highlighting basic collections management training: how to conduct an inventory; writing a long-range preservation plan; grant writing for preservation funding; basic conservation treatments; monitoring and improving environmental conditions; the first 48 hours after a disaster; establishing a response team; and security issues. We will develop templates and provide resources that can be modified for use by a variety of cultural institutions. To make the meeting worthwhile, participants will have tangible reference materials to take home with them, including sample mission statements, samples of general collections management documentation for a variety of institutions and organizations, as well as benchmarks for good-better-best practices to help each institution attain best practices. To measure success of the meetings the NDCHI Advisory Board will conduct a follow up questionnaire with each participant. These activities will serve as a foundation for a later implementation grant.

#### The Planning Process:

The planning process will take place within the NDCHI Advisory Board, made up of representatives from Museums in North Dakota (MiND), Dickinson State University, two National Historic Sites - Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site and Fort Union Trading Post National Historic Site, Plains Art Museum, State Historical Society of North Dakota, North Dakota Library Association (NDLA) and West Fargo Public Library. This diverse Board will provide a broad perspective and decision making authority and oversight as well as help facilitate a network of contacts across the state for disseminating information. Expected results include formalizing for the first time a statewide network of museums, archives, historical societies, and libraries. This network will be a vehicle for starting an active and sustained dialog among history/cultural professionals, understanding challenges that each of us face, and building strategies for collaboration on ongoing educational opportunities, disaster assistance, and establishment of best practices. Assessment of institutional holdings, storage conditions, staffing, and needs and priorities will be a starting point for addressing deficiencies pinpointed in the Heritage Health Index. Products of the grant project will include a web-based publication of the institutional survey results and assessment of the outcome of all eight of the regional assessment meetings.

#### Project Resources: Budget and Personnel

The members of the NDCHI Advisory Board have limits to the time they can devote to this project. Facilitation of the eight regional meetings will be a larger commitment than any Board member can make, thus it was decided to engage Clearwater Communications to provide consistency in the coordination and facilitation of each of the eight regional assessment meetings along with the compilation and presentation of all data collected as they had successfully facilitated similar highly successful meetings last year for the state Department of Tourism.

The project director position will be shared by two NDCHI Board members, Mark Ryan, Vice President of Collections and Registration at the Plains Art Museum and Ann Jenks, State Archivist for the state of North Dakota. One project co-director will be responsible for working with the Clearwater facilitator ensuring all grant activities including training, the meetings, collection and collation of data, and reporting back to participants and the media at large are running efficiently and according to plans. The other co-director will handle grant reporting and budget expenditures. Eight trainers (four for the east half of the state regional meetings and four for the west half) will include a representative each from museums, libraries, and archives, and a facilitator from Clearwater Communications.

The budget will include funds for the travel of the eight trainers to the regional meetings and to a “train the trainer” session to be held in Bismarck, ND; travel and lunch for the participants in the regional meetings; and printing and postage. The remaining half of the budget will be allocated to Clearwater Communications for the activities described above.

The NDCHI Advisory Board and Clearwater Communications will identify and train facilitators to ensure consistency in message content, delivery, and feedback for each of the eight regional assessment meetings. The Clearwater Communications facilitator will work with the NDCHI Advisory Board to develop the survey format/delivery mechanism and database format/access options, and will also be responsible for the collation information on the state’s collections into a centralized database, and will send out meeting survey results and meeting assessment questionnaires. The NDCHI Advisory Board and Clearwater Communications facilitator will develop PR/marketing strategy to take full advantage of all available media outlets to increase public awareness of collections-based initiatives and concerns as well as utilize existing resources available via the IMLS Connecting to Collections initiative, and will encourage participation in regional meetings by getting the word out via local radio and television outlets, press releases, list serves, flyers, community bulletin boards, mailing lists, and local ambassadors in each community.

Much work needs to be done to protect our cultural resources, and this planning grant will enable the NDCHI to ascertain the current state of collections in the state, ascertain the most urgent of needs and utilize this information to begin in earnest on a follow up implementation grant based on needs identified by the above described assessment meetings and associated survey results.